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Many hams make light work

A stage director is giving children a sense of what it's like to be professional actors, writes Winnie Chau



The secret to working with child actors is to treat them as if they are grown-ups. That is why Nicholas Atkinson, the creative development manager of Faust International Youth Theatre, gives his young actors as much respect as he does his peers. Atkinson, an actor himself, constantly reminds his cast of legendary acting teacher Stanislavski's motto: there are no small parts, just small actors.

"One thing I hate is when children feel like they are left out because they don't have a line in a play," says Atkinson, who when directing his stage adaptation of *Kensuke's Kingdom*, a children's novel by Michael Morpurgo, Atkinson gave his 39 young actors plenty of freedom, regardless of their part, to share ideas, develop scenes and even devise lines. There



Children rehearse for the stage adaptation of the children's novel *Kensuke's Kingdom*. Photos: Jonathan Wong

are only four main human characters in the book, but the director has expanded this a little by giving 20 of the 30 side characters lines for this first theatrical rendition in Hong Kong.

The novel was adapted by Britain's Birmingham Stage Company in 2006 as an adult cast production for children. But Faust's version targets a family audience. "Our aim is to put on a play that doesn't feel like you are going to a school production. Try to bring in all the values that I've learned in my 10 years of acting and give them to the children," says Atkinson, who has worked as a professional actor in Britain and elsewhere. "I tell the children to treat themselves as professional actors playing a part."

The physically and emotionally demanding adventure in *Kensuke's Kingdom* comes to life on stage.

The director believes it will be the most powerful when the lines are delivered by young actors—the 75-year-old *Kensuke* is played in rotation by two actors, who are around the age of 17.

However, themes aside, *Kensuke's Kingdom* is essentially about miscommunication. The old Japanese soldier often refuses to communicate with the 12-year-old British boy. Atkinson says he speaks in broken English and Japanese, which is understandable to English boys.

It's mostly the accents and the movement that build up the dramatic tension. But the director has to do the opposite: assist the characters to do his job as actors: articulate the scenes. Not only must Atkinson make everything pain, he also needs to inform the young actors of the director's advice.

As a pre-scholar exercise, he



gives the cast a list of action verbs to ensure they understood why they are saying the words to each other.

Having worked with both adults and children, Atkinson is convinced that children's concept of acting is quite different. "They are focused for the most part," he says.

"I remember one year we had to make some changes and we gave them to the kids about 30 minutes before they went on to perform. There was no hesitation, no fear. I've worked with adult actors who would have a heavy fit if we tried to do that."

Drama can play a significant part in childhood, the director says. "It



Correction of visual problems opens the door to a new world. Photo: Corbis

often opportunities for children to explore their imaginations, to step out of their comfort zones and to push themselves in ways they don't always get the chance to do at school.

The director adds: "I've never met a child who says 'I don't want to do it' or 'let's not do it' before they start to perform. It's not always overtly expressed." "I often find that the shyest children become the best actors," Atkinson says.

He thinks that most children are natural actors, and they are much less self-conscious than adults. "Children tell a story from an internal place. They are doing a lot of things to act, which adults pay a lot of money to go to classes to learn things—things they did instinctively as children," he says.

"I'm trying to dig out the myths that act like some magical, sacred thing."

It may not be sacred, but acting does have responsibilities. "The children have a job to do in telling that story, and they've got to do it with the best of their ability. I try to be quite firm about it, and at the same time, I try and make sure that they have a bit of fun too," he says of the cast in *Kensuke's Kingdom*.

Some of the cast of this story revolves around the second world war. So they have got a real responsibility to tell properly," says Atkinson.

"It's the first time when they are introduced to small type. Content requires greater focus for the eyes," Wanchow says.

He advocates a range of exercises and techniques to correct problems with processing visual information.

Clarity begins at home

Poor visual function skills can hinder a child's education, says Elaine Yau

Children with poor binocular coordination might develop double vision or a squint. The excessive use of tablets among children also adversely affects the development of children's visual function skills," So adds.

To raise parental awareness of visual function skills, PolyVision recently launched a vision assessment programme for primary students. In addition to routine eye checks, each hour-long session will also test the child's visual function skills. Although most children eventually grow out of problems with visual function, So says failing to correct them during childhood, when they are most curious and eager to learn, puts youngsters at a disadvantage.

"A child with poor visual function will not have the same problem after he turns 20, even if he doesn't receive any therapy or help. This is because he will have developed the appropriate visual skills by then. But a critical period for learning visual has already passed," So says.

"One way to develop children's visual function skills is to expose them to lots of different experiences. For example, a child playing football on a pitch will get the chance to make use of various visual functions. He has to follow the ball with his eyes, while scanning the whole pitch for his team mates."

Chow's girl has been diagnosed early. Last year, she started *Nickelodeon* in an eight-week remedial programme at PolyVision to boost his visual function and is delighted by the progress that her son has made.

"The teacher exercises that must be repeated at home," explains Chow. "One exercise involves him wearing a special pair of spectacles. I place a card filled with graphics close to him and then move it further away to help him adjust his focus. He has shown much improvement, and no longer misses words when reading."

Only correction of visual impairment makes children better at focusing on screens. "Once the child is in focus, they are happy and smiling," Wanchow says.

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They may be seated at the back of the classroom.

"After looking at the blackboard, their view becomes briefly blurred when they switch to the textbooks in front of them. This makes it difficult for them to respond as quickly as other students do," So says.

"Binocular co-ordination is another important visual function skill. Both eyes need to work as a unit to visually locate a target. The brain receives the images from both eyes and combines them to form a single 3-D image.

Symptoms that can result from overworking the eye muscles in an attempt to better focus the vision—blurred vision, headaches and loss of concentration, for example—are also observed in children suffering from attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity and dyslexia.

When children sit up, or fail to respond in class because they have trouble tracking the text, it may be mistaken for indifference, says PolyVision's So.

"These children may be scolded by teachers for being slow in class.

Additional reporting by Abigail Collier

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ELAINE YAU, POLYVISION

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